

[朝日新聞デジタル Japanese](#) [朝日新聞中文网 Chinese](#) [Asahi Asia Antenna - 독자와 함께 Korean](#)

PROMETHEUS TRAP/ 'Shadow units' (6): SDF members exposed to high radiation levels in reactor explosion

March 15, 2013

0

By HIDEFUMI NOGAMI/ Staff Writer

Editor's note: This is the sixth part of a new series that has run in the past under the title of The Prometheus Trap. This series deals with the secret missions assigned to the "shadow units" of the Ground Self-Defense Force when the Fukushima nuclear disaster was unfolding following the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. The series will appear on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

* * *

Six members of the Central NBC Weapon Defense Unit, including unit commander Col. Shinji Iwakuma, could not be contacted after an explosion occurred at the No. 3 reactor of the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant on March 14, 2011.

The explosion was also heard at the off-site center, located five kilometers southwest of the plant, where the central government had established a local response headquarters to deal with the nuclear accident. A mushroom cloud was also visible from that center.

Lt. Col. Kazunori Hishinuma, 54, was nearby installing equipment to be used for decontamination work when a subordinate told him that radio communications with Iwakuma had been cut off.

Hishinuma instinctively knew that Iwakuma and his unit must have been affected by the explosion. The lieutenant colonel ran to the off-site center.

The entrance to the building was sealed off to prevent radiation from entering, so Hishinuma had to shout to attract the attention of someone inside.

"Radio contact with the unit commander has been cut off!"

Eventually, a Self-Defense Force member appeared, and a piece of paper was held against the glass in the door. The paper said, "Go to the hospital at the Fukushima No. 2 nuclear power plant."

The instruction meant that any injured personnel should be taken to the hospital at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant's sister facility, located about 12 kilometers to the south.

It was at that point when Hishinuma heard a voice behind him.

"If you're looking for me, I'm here."

It was Iwakuma. The other five members of his unit were with him.

About 40 minutes had passed since the explosion.

All six wore protective gear that was covered with dust and dirt. One member was dragging his leg due to an injury. There was blood on the protective gear.

"We have all been contaminated with radiation," Iwakuma said, spreading his arms wide. "Clean us up in a hurry."

Hishinuma took the six to the Fukushima prefectural environmental medical research institute next to the off-site center.

The institute had the equipment necessary for radiation testing and decontamination work. However, it had become inoperable after the natural disasters because of a blackout and water outage.

Hishinuma had been trying from the morning of March 14, 2011, to convert the building into a site where decontamination work could be conducted.

After clearing away fallen lockers, a generator was brought in and shower facilities installed. All the equipment belonged to the Central NBC Weapon Defense Unit.

After work was completed, a trial run for decontamination was conducted in cooperation with specialists from the National Institute of Radiological Sciences (NIRS). The explosion at the No. 3 reactor occurred right after the trial run was completed.

Although the decontamination facility had been prepared to decontaminate workers at the Fukushima plant, the first actual users would be members of the unit Hishinuma belonged to.

Before the decontamination work began, NIRS specialists checked the radiation exposure levels of Iwakuma and his men.

"These are very high," one specialist said. "It will be dangerous if all six of you are together in one place. Move away from each other."

If people who have been exposed to high levels of radiation stand in close proximity to each other, they will only further heighten the levels, just by being close to one another.

Iwakuma realized then the grave severity of the dangerous situation he had experienced.

* * *

The previous installments of this series are available at:

(1) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303040001>

(2) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303060001>

(3) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303080009>

(4) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303110012>

(5) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303130007>

By HIDEFUMI NOGAMI/ Staff Writer